

Testimony of Shailen Bhatt, Administrator of the Federal Highway Administration
U.S. Department of Transportation
Before the Senate Committee on Environment and Public Works
June 5, 2024
10:00am

Chairman Carper, Ranking Member Capito, and Members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today.

We are halfway through the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law’s five-year authorization period. When I appeared before this Committee a year ago, I noted that FHWA was working tirelessly to implement the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law and the Inflation Reduction Act. That same level of effort continues, and today I look forward to discussing FHWA’s progress since I last appeared before the Committee.

I have long believed that a transportation agency exists for two reasons: to save lives and to make people’s lives better. The historic funding provided by the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law and Inflation Reduction Act is enabling projects that will do just that. Since enactment of the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law, FHWA has distributed over \$180 billion in highway formula funding to States and issued Notices of Funding Opportunity for over \$16 billion in available discretionary funds. The success of these programs depends, in part, on the streamlined delivery of funding – to get projects to, and through, construction. Since enactment of the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law, FHWA has taken steps to speed up project delivery. For example, we stood up a new, permanent team to oversee grants-management matters and have several acceleration activities underway. FHWA has a history of providing technical assistance and is committed to supporting our stakeholders at the State, local, and Tribal levels to ensure we deliver projects on time and on budget.

Since I last appeared before this Committee, FHWA has continued to make significant progress in advancing new programs and funding projects that improve safety, reduce bottlenecks to keep freight moving, and will make our infrastructure more resilient. The President’s budget request of \$62.8 billion for FHWA, which, when added to the \$9.5 billion in advance appropriations contained in the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law, results in a total of \$72.3 billion, builds on the progress made to date and will enable continued progress as we deliver on the promise of this historic legislation. FHWA’s mission begins and ends with safety, and in addition to safety, FHWA’s work is guided by an initiative we refer to as “DRIVEN for the 21st Century.” There are six aspects to this initiative: Delivery, Resilience, Innovation, Values, Equity, and our Nation.

One example that is emblematic of FHWA’s progress is the rehabilitation and reconfiguration of the Brent Spence Bridge. When I was a college student at Western Kentucky University, I used to drive across that bridge and remember thinking it was very old. While serving as a Deputy Executive Director at the Kentucky Transportation Cabinet, funding for the bridge seemed decades away. During the Obama Administration I served at FHWA and I remember the Ohio congressional delegation highlighting the funding needs for the bridge, but we were unable to

move it forward. We announced a grant award for the rehabilitation and reconstruction of the bridge in 2023, and completed the environmental review last month. Now, this bridge that connects the Kentucky and Ohio communities on either side of the Ohio River is no longer a decades-away dream but is a reality as the project is expected to go to construction later this year. The Brent Spence Bridge project is a prime example, but there are tens of thousands of projects across the country that are becoming a reality thanks to the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law.

The backdrop to all project delivery remains safety, which is FHWA's number one priority. I have spent my entire career in transportation working to make our roadways safer and I believe our collective work has saved lives. Although we have seen some signs for cautious optimism based on recent data, roadway fatalities, particularly among vulnerable road users, remain stubbornly high and much work remains to improve road safety. Whether it is the over \$1.7 billion in grants to over 1,000 local communities under the Safe Streets and Roads for All (SS4A) Program to improve road safety and help prevent deaths and serious injuries on their roads, the Saving Lives with Connectivity: Accelerating Vehicle to Everything (V2X) Deployment grant opportunity, or the Intersection Safety Challenge that aims to transform roadway intersection safety, all of these investments under the umbrella of the National Roadway Safety Strategy will be critical to saving lives. We look forward to delivering these projects with a resolute focus on our goal of zero deaths on American roadways. We need to continue to make investments in safety, make good safety policy decisions, and harness technology to get us to our goal of zero deaths—not decades from now but much sooner.

Projects that improve safety are being delivered all over the country. Last September, I joined State and local officials in Wyoming to unveil 200 new truck parking spaces along Interstate 80. These new truck parking spaces will improve safety and facilitate safe and efficient freight movement along one of the busiest Interstates in the U.S. Last year, the first component of a Tribal Safety Project in North Dakota began construction, and construction for the second component of the project is planned for this year. The project, which was awarded a \$19.5 million RAISE grant, will provide safer roads on the Standing Rock Indian Reservation and Mandan-Hidatsa-Arikara (MHA) Nation, and will reduce delays to improve mobility and community connectivity for underserved and disadvantaged Tribal communities.

During my career, I have always believed in our ability to achieve transformation through transportation. I was pleased to witness this in action recently in Newark, Delaware, where I joined State and local officials for the renaming of the Newark Regional Transportation Center as the Thomas R. Carper Train Station. This train station was transformed from a former automotive plant into a multi-modal passenger rail station. This project, which received over \$12 million in funding under the Department of Transportation's TIGER Program (now known as RAISE), was a transit-oriented development catalyst for University of Delaware's Science, Technology and Advanced Research (STAR) Campus. Although it is not a highway project, there are countless examples of similar transformation happening with transportation infrastructure across the country. Thank you, Senator Carper, for being a transformational leader and a true bipartisan champion for transportation.

One area of transformation is our progress towards a convenient, affordable, reliable, and equitable national electric vehicle (EV) charging network. While some have been critical of progress related to building out an electric vehicle network, since the President took office, the number of publicly available charging ports has grown by over 90 percent, with over 183,000 publicly available EV charging ports across the country. Our programs are accelerating private sector investment that puts us on track to deploy 500,000 charging ports well ahead of schedule and continue to expand a convenient and reliable charging network. FHWA, in collaboration with the Joint Office of Energy and Transportation, continues to work with States as they access the \$7.5 billion from the National Electric Vehicle Infrastructure (NEVI) Program and Charging and Fueling Infrastructure (CFI) Discretionary Grant Program. Each State was required to submit an update to their EV Infrastructure Deployment Plan by August 1, 2023. FHWA approved all EV charging plans from States, Puerto Rico, and the District of Columbia, unlocking approximately \$885 million in FY 2024 NEVI formula funding to implement those plans. EV charging stations funded by the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law have been opened in six States: Hawaii, Ohio, New York, Pennsylvania, Maine, and Vermont, with EV chargers in more States expected to come online soon. In January 2024, FHWA announced \$623 million in Community and Corridor grants under the CFI Program to strategically deploy publicly accessible EV charging and alternative fueling infrastructure projects in 22 States and Puerto Rico. The first round of grants will fund construction of an estimated 7,500 EV charging ports. Also in January, FHWA announced the award of nearly \$150 million to 24 grant recipients in 20 States to make existing EV charging infrastructure more reliable. These grants, under the EV Charger Reliability and Accessibility Accelerator, will be used to repair or replace nearly 4,500 existing EV charging ports. FHWA is working with recipients to execute grant agreements as expeditiously as possible, which will translate into more ports available to drivers of EVs. We issued the NOFO for the second round of funding for these two programs on May 30, 2024.

I want to recognize this Committee for championing passage of the first surface transportation infrastructure bill to include a climate title, recognizing the growing impacts of our changing climate throughout the country. We need a resilient transportation system. The Bipartisan Infrastructure Law provides historic resources to address this issue. In April, FHWA announced nearly \$830 million in grants from the PROTECT Discretionary Grant Program for 80 projects nationwide to help communities strengthen transportation infrastructure to make it more resilient to natural hazards, including climate change, extreme weather, and other disasters. I was in Kalamazoo, Michigan, where I joined Governor Whitmer and other State and local officials to celebrate a \$38 million award under this program to update aging stormwater infrastructure. While in Kalamazoo, I heard stories from so many people who shared vivid memories of the terrible flooding they endured just a few years ago. This PROTECT award represents more than just funding to the people of Kalamazoo—it represents hope that they will never have to endure such horrible flooding again. Last month, I was in Philadelphia to celebrate a \$14 million award under the PROTECT Discretionary Grant Program to rehabilitate two deteriorating bridges over Wissahickon Creek in Northwest Philadelphia. Built in the 1800s, the Bells Mill Road and Valley Green Road bridges provide access to Wissahickon Valley Park, a noteworthy natural destination in the city that experiences frequent flooding. At the event, I met a potential future FHWA Administrator – an eight-year-old boy who came to visit the project on his bicycle. He and I had an opportunity to sit down and discuss infrastructure. His enthusiasm not only filled me with great hope for the future, but our conversation was a reminder that the projects that are

occurring today thanks to the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law will have positive effects for future generations.

Our transportation system primarily was designed and built in the 20th Century. It was not designed to handle the climate impacts we are seeing in the 21st Century. Since January 2021, FHWA has made available over \$3.5 billion in Emergency Relief (ER) Program funding to States, territories, Tribal governments, and Federal Land Management Agencies for climate-related events. Whether it is damaged roads in California caused by Tropical Storm Hilary or flood damage that caused the closure of Yellowstone National Park and impacted roads and bridges in Montana, Wyoming and the surrounding areas, climate-related disasters impact our transportation assets in States throughout the country, without regard to political makeup, geographic location, or topography. I have witnessed this first-hand holding leadership positions in three States during my transportation career. Hurricanes Irene and Sandy devastated Delaware and many States along the East Coast. In Colorado, we grappled with the impacts of wildfires and flooding. And in Kentucky, we experienced torrential flooding. Every State in our Nation is impacted by climate events. And the increased frequency with which these impacts are occurring highlights the significance of the ER Program and the financial strain that it is currently under.

While not a climate-related event, the most visible recent ER event to all Americans is the collapse of the Francis Scott Key Bridge in Baltimore on March 26, and I would be remiss if I did not highlight the efforts of FHWA and Department staff, the Maryland Department of Transportation, the City of Baltimore, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, the U.S. Coast Guard, and private sector stakeholders, who have responded to that disaster. I also want to thank the emergency responders who acted quickly to save lives. The response to this disaster has highlighted the ability of industry and government entities to work together in times of calamity as they have done since the bridge collapse. It truly has been a whole-of-government response. While FHWA's focus now is supporting Maryland as much as possible as they work to reconstruct the bridge, we must not lose sight of the devastating impact this tragedy has had on the victims and their families. We will always mourn the six individuals who lost their lives while working to strengthen our transportation system.

I have been engaged in a number of bridge-related incidents during my career, including the comparatively smaller but still impactful bridge incidents on I-95 in Philadelphia and on I-10 in Los Angeles, and I have never seen something on the scale of the Key Bridge collapse. While it is a monumental task to clean up the site and rebuild, the coordinated response by government and industry to date gives me great optimism. Less than two weeks ago, I was pleased to join State and local officials in Philadelphia to commemorate the complete reopening of I-95. That reopening—less than one year after the partial collapse of that vital corridor—is thanks to the tireless work of local, State, and Federal partners, the private sector, and union crews working around the clock, and is a testament to the strength of our partnerships and what we can accomplish when we work together.

From delivering projects to improve safety and resilience, to responding to emergency events, during my remaining tenure as Administrator, I will continue to endeavor to ensure that FHWA serves as a shining example to the American people of government in action.

Thank you again for the opportunity to appear before you today. I would be happy to answer any questions.

###